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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether a sequence of graduate field experiences integrated throughout a teacher training program would result in differentiated responses of competence and self-confidence. Participants were graduate students in a traditional preservice program (group 1) and those in a more accelerated program combining fieldwork with evening courses (group 2). Performance assessments and self-assessments occurred at the beginning and end of participants' student teaching semester and after two years in their first teaching position. Results indicated significantly higher ratings by the supervisors of Group 2 students during student teaching and on the job. The greatest differences related to classroom management, assessment strategies, and adaptability in accommodating individual needs. Self-assessments for the two groups followed the same pattern. Group 2 students indicated more self-assurance and confidence at both levels within the time frame noted. Results supported the thesis that immersion in a sequence of field experiences throughout teacher training leads to more confidence on the part of student teachers and more competence in handling their classrooms. Results also provided support for teacher training programs that are ecologically designed, rather than the traditional preparation sequence of graduate study, limited field experiences, and student teaching. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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IMMERSION: THE CORE OF TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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The Core of Teacher Education

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The purpose of the current research was to determine whether a sequence of graduated field experiences integrated throughout a teacher training program of study would result in differentiated responses of competence and self-confidence. A comparative study was undertaken to test that premise with graduate students in a traditional, pre-service program (Group I) and those in a more accelerated program that combined field work simultaneously with evening courses (Group II).

Performance assessments and self-assessments of both groups of students occurred at the beginning and end of their student teaching semester and after two years in their first position as classroom teachers. The results indicated significantly higher ratings by the supervisors of Group II students at both the student teaching level and on the job. The greatest differences between the two groups occurred on three dimensions: Classroom management, assessment strategies, and adaptability in accommodating individual needs.

The self-assessments for the two groups followed the same pattern. Group II students indicated more self-assurance and confidence at both levels within the time frame noted. The results clearly supported the thesis that immersion in a sequence of field experiences throughout the teacher-training program leads to more confidence on the part of students in teacher training and more competence in handling their classrooms. These variables were measured by their self-perceptions, their ratings, and their post-training evaluations in their first teaching positions. The study also provided support for a teacher-training program that is ecologically designed in contrast to a traditional preparation sequence of graduate study, limited field experiences, and student teaching.

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IMMERSION: The Core of Teacher Education

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Background

If the training of teachers is ever to be effective for the demands of a new age, all the parts of this preparation must fit together like an ecosystem. Previous authors have written about the advantages of an integrated curriculum (Hamm & Adams, 1992), thematic units (Maurer, 1994), interdisciplinary studies (Grady, 1994), the integration of content areas with education courses (Lonning & De Franco, 1994), the combining of field activities with reflective practices (Costa & Kallick, 2000), experiential instruction (Byerly, 2001), and the linking of all methods courses in a block of study before student teaching (Wright, Sorrels, & Granby, 1996). These approaches can be quite effective. However, they often operate in isolation without acknowledging their interdependence with other components of the whole system. The effort to apply the learnings accumulated to other activities or training components is not always seen as feasible.

For example, reflection by definition is commonly undertaken in retrospection. It usually does not include exploration to determine possible or probable events. An integrated approach would include both the hypothesis and the conclusion and then would build on these thought processes with various forms of rehearsal for ensuring continuity of inquiry, as well as memory enhancement, leading to mastery. Some programs require new Education students to write their philosophy of teaching before they develop a knowledge base about the teaching-learning process and before they make the connections between what they learn in university classes and what they observe in the field.

All but five states have testing requirements for candidates who apply for a teaching certificate. These are primarily standardized examinations or State-issued paper-and-pencil tests. Their content consists of basic skills, general knowledge, subject matter, knowledge of teaching, or combinations thereof. Only 13 states require a teaching performance assessment. State agencies primarily hold universities accountable for determining the readiness of candidates for classroom teaching in terms of their teaching skills from their examination scores, college course grades, and supervisors' evaluations of their performance in a student teaching experience.

Most states require traditional student teaching for licensure. Some allow alternative experiences or previous teaching to waive the student teaching requirement. Only one-fourth require any field study prior to student teaching. Immersion in field experiences--for meaningful rehearsal and a constructivist view of

teaching--would seem to be the key to teaching success and mastery of the teaching-learning process. The present study was conducted to test this position. More recently, authors have begun to add in-the-field suggestions for a more successful preparation in the profession (e.g., Berry, 2001; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Soares, 1998; Wise & Leibbrand, 2000).

An Ecological Model of Teacher Education

In an earlier publication, the essence of our ecosystem was fundamentally described, drawing from three different thinkers--Copernicus, Dewey, and Gardner--with relevance to the classroom (Soares, 1998). The discussion centered upon three components: Structure, Content, and Process.

The structure of the system is an application of the Copernican Plan (Carroll, 1994). It involves a Cluster Curriculum that is arranged in semester blocks of three cognate fields--Science, Social Science, and Humanities. All the experiences that the trainees have are linked to these interconnected areas, including methods, foundation courses, field activities, observations, assignments, lectures, discussions, monthly seminars, daily school experiences, and reflections in each of the college terms.

The content of the system combines the three cognate clusters to shape the training in an interdisciplinary approach with the seven capacities of linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence (ref., Gardner, 1983). This component enables the students to accomplish two major objectives:

(1) The achievement of a higher level of mastery in themselves so that they may foster the development of children's strengths; and,

(2) The development of the capacity to teach successfully in inter-disciplinary studies.

The orientation and pre-training seminars contribute to the process of the system by introducing the students to full integration with the concepts of collateral training and immersion. A century ago, John Dewey (1904) suggested that students training to become teachers should teach throughout their period of preparation, "thereby learning directly how to teach in ways that are consistent with their own strengths, experiences, and philosophy" (Soares, 1998, p. 218). This concept of apprenticeship would mitigate against students imitating and replicating the practices which they found either in their university courses or in experienced teachers' classes--rather than reflecting upon the practices they either observed or exercised.

In applying Dewey's ideas to the preparation of teachers, the linkage of their university program with daily instructional experiences throughout the preparation period--in other words, collateral training and full immersion--provides reinforcement of the skills for effective teaching that cannot be duplicated in any other way.

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With daily and continuous exposure to both the activities and the culture of American classrooms, the students in training can begin to process the images of effective practices and construct additional images through reflection, exploration, and verification.

The Problem

The major purpose of this study was to determine whether a sequence of graduated field experiences that immersed the students throughout their accelerated teacher preparation program would result in differentiated responses of competence and self-confidence. A comparative study was undertaken to test that premise with graduate students in a traditional, pre-service program (Group I) and those in the program outlined above that combined field work collaterally with evening courses (Group II), employing the cluster curriculum, the pre-training seminars, and daily, year-long internships. Both groups enrolled in the same evening courses during the academic year. Most students in Group I held full-time jobs during the day. Those in Group II spent their days at a school placement, engaged in many forms of classroom assistance--e.g., teacher's aide, substitute teacher, project coordinator, leader of small-group instruction, planner of cooperative learning experiences, etc. In return for these activities, their school districts paid the tuition for their master's degree courses directly to the university. The internships were primarily arranged in the ten months of the academic year, from September through June, while they completed course requirements for their choice of licensure endorsement and the graduate degree. Ten weeks of traditional student teaching followed for all students.

Methodology

The *Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA)* scale was used in this study. This instrument was designed and copyrighted in 1991 by Soares & Soares. It was revised in 1999 and is now in review by the Buros Foundation at the University of Nebraska.

Three forms of the *TPA* were distributed to the subjects to measure self-assessment and supervisory ratings:

- Δ "Classroom Aides" (pre-student teaching)
- Δ "Student Teachers" (in their final term), and
- Δ "Classroom Teachers" (in a two-year follow-up).

The two groups of students had comparable backgrounds, quality point averages, grades in their undergraduate major studies, etc. Group I had a traditional program of teacher education courses, classroom observations, limited instructional activities with public school students, and student teaching before applying for certification. Group II had a sequence of field experiences throughout their program of ongoing internships and evening classes, which enabled the students to reflect, analyze, and discuss their daily activities with their course instructors, classroom teachers, and field supervisors. Periodic field markers were added to their daily internship in the following sequence (#1-#8):

(1) Observations & research into best practices
(2) Preparation & analysis of classroom materials
(3) Assistance in classroom management & field trips
(4) Classroom projects & school activities
(5) Discussion groups & cooperative learning
(6) Networking & cyberspace direction
(7) Mini-teaching & team teaching
(8) Small-group instruction
===
(9) Student teaching & practicum (separate, intact experience)

Performance assessments were undertaken on each unit of these sequential activities for Group II. Comparable assessments were obtained on observational activities, classroom projects, periodic small-group instruction, and student teaching for Group I--that is, items #1, #4, #8. and #9 from the list above. Students in Group I did not have the other experiences listed; nor did they participate in an internship during the day. Both groups of students were required to maintain three types of portfolios:

- Developmental--for determining progress
- Self-assessment--for gauging achievement
- Showcase--for demonstrating successes

Results

On the "Classroom Aides" scale, the self-assessments were essentially the same at the pretest level, but Group II indicated significantly higher self-assessments at the posttest level in comparison to Group I. The supervisors' ratings demonstrated the same pattern for the two groups.

On the "Student Teacher" scale, the students in Group II showed higher self-assessments at both the pretest and posttest levels. The supervisors' ratings indicated the same pattern.

On the "Classroom Teacher" scale, students in Group II indicated higher self-assessments at both the pretest and posttest levels in comparison to those in Group I. The supervisors' ratings indicated a similar pattern with significantly *lower* ratings of Group I at both the pretest and posttest levels than for Group II. The greatest differences between the two groups occurred on nine dimensions in favor of Group II:

- reflective practices
- transitional activities
- classroom management
- assessment strategies
- understanding of school culture
- self-assessment of their expertise
- flexibility in changing lesson plans when necessary
- adaptability in accommodating individual needs
- ability to help every student to learn

Figure 1 presents the relative placement of the scores from the three different scales of the *Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA).* Figure 2 illustrates the ecological model of teacher training.

Significance

The two graduate groups were fundamentally similar when they initiated their programs in teacher education. However, the immersion group started to show superiority when their continual, daily (planned for the duration of an academic year), and varied experiences in the schools began to take hold of their professional attitudes. This on-going activity gives them a professional expertise that typically comes only after several years of experience as a classroom teacher. It also gives them a reality check about their capabilities, which adds to their self-assurance. The immersion and the collateral training factors are clearly more conducive to learning both the science and art of teaching than is the case with a more traditional, and historically longer-standing, program. The results seem to support the following concepts of effective practices:

- Immersion in a collateral sequence of field experiences and academic study throughout the teacher-training program leads to more confidence on the part of students in teacher training and more competence in handling their classrooms.

- Mastery of the teaching-learning process results from varied opportunities for rehearsal and constructivist approaches to building understanding of that process.

- The preparation of teachers is best designed as an ecological system of links among the goals and objectives, the courses, the reflective assignments, the field experiences, the assessments, and the continual interactions with the students and all others who connect with those students.

A well-known quotation by John Dewey in that "we learn by doing" is as relevant today as it was 100 years ago. We have gradually moved away from that edict, relying more upon "studying" education as opposed to "experiencing" it. We are not here dichotomizing these concepts or polarizing the parts. Rather, we are integrating them into a system of connections, mutually related constructs, and sequential higher order processes, where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This ecological system of teacher education will thereby ensure that the teacher in training will more likely and more deeply become a successful professional who can effectively help children become the best they can be.

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FIGURE 1

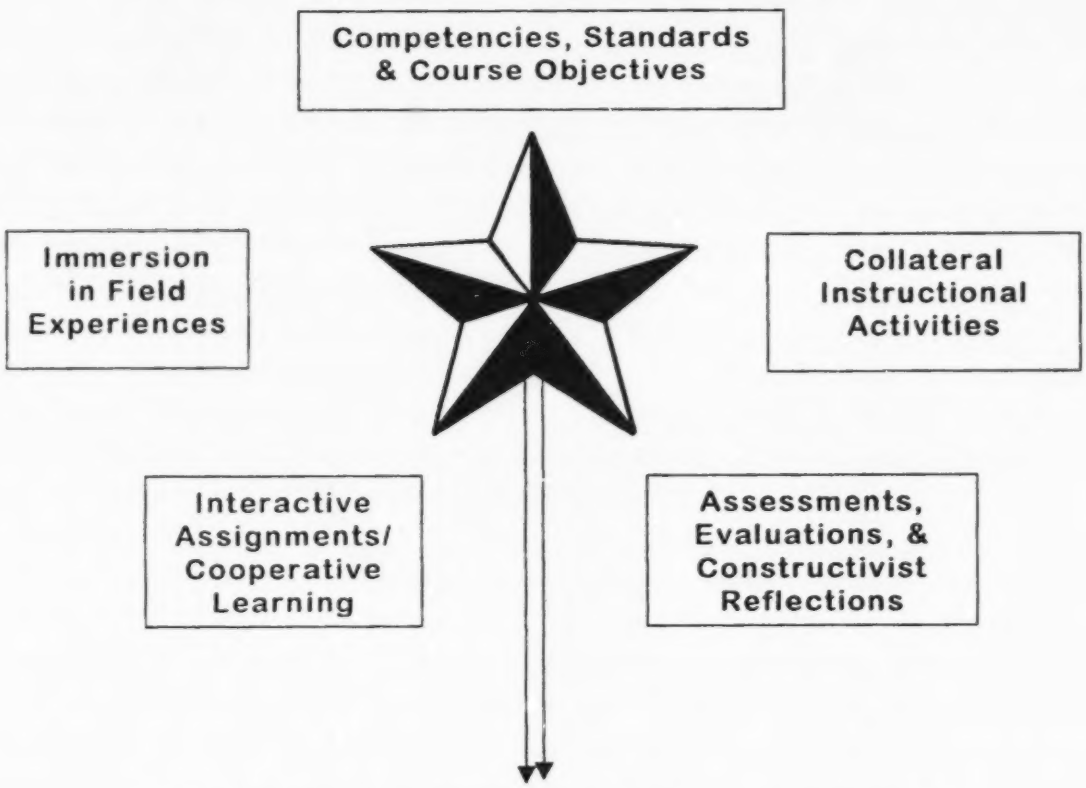
COMPARISONS OF SELF-ASSESSMENTS AND SUPERVISORY RATINGS
OF STUDENTS IN TWO ACCELERATED GRADUATE PROGRAMS
IN TEACHER TRAINING

SCALE		Classroom Aide			Student Teacher			Classroom Teacher	
ASSESSMENT		Self	Supervisor		Self	Supervisor		Self	Supervisor
	[Test Level]								
GROUP I [Pretest]	High								
	Medium								
	Low	√	√		√	√		√	√
GROUP I [Posttest]	High								
	Medium	√	√		√	√		√	√
	Low								
	[Test Level]								
GROUP II [Pretest]	High								
	Medium				√	√		√	√
	Low	√	√						
GROUP II [Posttest]	High								
	Medium	√	√		√	√		√	√
	Low								

GROUP I: Graduate students in a traditional teacher preparation program
GROUP II: Graduate students in a teacher preparation program with parallel & sequential field experiences

Figure 2

An Ecological Model of Teacher Education


Competencies, Standards & Course Objectives
Immersion in Field Experiences
Collateral Instructional Activities
Interactive Assignments/ Cooperative Learning
Assessments, Evaluations, & Constructivist Reflections
MASTERY OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS

Dr. Louise M. Soares *Dr. Anthony T. Soares*

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